

Universal Free School Meals Help to Reduce Financial Strain for Minnesota Families and are Linked to Higher Student Participation in School Meals



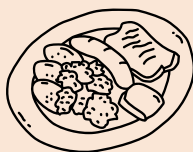
A University of Minnesota study conducted surveys with parents of Minnesota students to learn about their participation in school meal programs. Surveys conducted before (spring or summer 2023) and after (fall 2023) the implementation of universal free school meals were completed by 112 parent participants in the population-based Eating and Activity over Time (EAT) study. Parents reported on household food insecurity, financial strain, utilization of school meals, and benefits and barriers to student participation in school meals.

Key Findings

- At both time points in the spring/summer and fall, more than half (57%) of participating households reported a recent experience of food insecurity within the past month.
- Parents shared that free school meals have helped to reduce household financial strain; however, many households still lacked adequate resources to achieve food security. Parents shared things like:

“The last 30 days it's mainly been myself that had to cut back so my child could eat balanced meals all days.”

“It's been helpful with the cost of school lunches because the year prior, it costed a lot of money to pay for school lunches. This helps me provide good meals at home meanwhile the school provides meals at school.”



Key Findings (continued)

- Implementation of universal free school meals in fall 2023 was linked to higher student participation in school meal programs and parents reported it has helped their student to eat more healthy foods. Comments from parents included:

“It (free school meals) has saved money and time, along with providing a better nutrition based meal. My child was also a picky eater and eating different foods at school is allowing her to grow her pallet. She comes home telling me what she has ate and actually eats more fruits and vegetables at home because of it.”

“Has been helpful since they are exposed to vegetables and fruits every day.”



- Addressing barriers to participation in school meal programs may help more students to benefit from universal free school meals. The most common concerns regarding school meal participation were related to children having inadequate time to eat their meal, child food allergies, and food quality and portion sizes.

Implications

1 Continuing to provide universal free school meals for Minnesota students has the potential to sustain higher levels of participation in school meal programs and reduce financial strain for Minnesota families.

Implementing additional strategies could enhance the benefits associated with universal free school meals.

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- Consider implementing ‘second chance’ breakfast programs after homeroom or the first period of the school day.
 - Offer menu alternatives for students with allergies or cultural concerns.
 - Provide information about the nutritional content of menu items to help address food quality concerns.

3 Parents perceived that universal free meals are helpful with regard to freeing up resources for the purchasing of healthy foods consumed at home. However, reducing food insecurity among Minnesota households with children will likely require the implementation of additional interventions and supports.

Authors and Contact Information

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